

Book Review

Terry Pinkard, *Power, Practice, and Forms of Life: Sartre's Appropriation of Hegel and Marx*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. ISBN 978-0-226-81324-0 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-226-81547-3 (pdf). Pp. 200. \$35.00.

In *Power, Practice, and Forms of Life: Sartre's Appropriation of Hegel and Marx*, Terry Pinkard offers a new reading of the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. Pinkard's main aim is to explain Sartre's approach to dialectical reason. Pinkard compares Sartre's thoughts on the dialectic to those of Hegel and Karl Marx, while also arguing for similarities between Sartre and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Sartre and Martin Heidegger.

The opening sentence of *Power, Practice, and Forms of Life* announces that 'Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* appeared in 1960 to great fanfare, had great influence on a variety of people and movements—Fanon supposedly lecture to the revolutionaries fighting the colonial powers in Africa on some of the topics in the *Critique*—and then rapidly fell from fashion' (ix). Pinkard submits that the *Critique* has 'gone out of fashion', and it is his task to re-read the book, and show how it is a central text in Sartre's corpus. Pinkard does a great job explaining the *Critique* to non-specialists, translating Sartre's existential vocabulary into terms familiar to philosophers whose reference points are not only Hegel and Marx, but John Rawls and Isaiah Berlin. Pinkard's method is what I would call textualism, by which I mean an interpretation grounded in the primary texts of Sartre, and dealing only lightly with what has been written about Sartre by his contemporaries or by later scholars. In the opening sentence Pinkard notes that the *Critique* 'had great influence on a variety of people and social movements', but he treats these movements as something in the past, and the mention of Frantz Fanon in this sentence is the only one in the book. Pinkard states that his footnotes are 'for scholars'. These footnotes contain long quotes from Sartre.

The best part of this book, in my opinion, is that it is clearly written, well organized and offers a simplified explanation of Sartrean dialectics that will appeal to people who have not read much Sartre and who are not familiar with Simone de Beauvoir and Fanon. For those familiar with and invested in Pinkard's corpus, especially his extensive work on Hegel, the book is also of importance, since it shows what a contemporary left-Hegelian interpretation of the *Critique* looks like. From the body of Pinkard's book we get a fine-grained analysis of Sartre's *Critique* (akin to what R. D. Laing did in *Reason and Violence: A Decade of Sartre's*

Philosophy: 1950–1960. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971). In the conclusion to his book, Pinkard offers up a striking claim: Sartre is a liberal. I disagree profoundly with this last claim, and yet, that is what philosophy is about in my estimation—I practise philosophy out of my respect for *difference*, not as a way to form a consensus.

The book seems ideal for a graduate seminar on Sartre or on the first volume of Sartre's *Critique*, or perhaps even better, for a seminar that tackles the precise theme in the subtitle: Hegel's and Marx's influence on Sartre. The reason this book would work great in a graduate seminar is because of the manuscript's textualism—the book emphasizes the relationship between today's philosophical scholar and her direct encounter with Sartre's texts, words, and concepts. Pinkard seems to have in mind a reader who is coming to Sartre mostly for the first time, and he makes a few implicit assumptions about this reader. This reader is familiar with Sartre only or mostly through *Being and Nothingness*, and perhaps a few other works from his early period, such as *Existentialism is a Humanism*. The imagined reader has not read the first volume of Sartre's *Critique*, much less the second volume or the accompanying work, *Search for Method*. Pinkard does not offer a periodization of Sartre's works into early, middle and late, as is common in the secondary literature. Nor does Pinkard offer a discussion of the status of different types of texts written by Sartre. I mention this because of the huge variety of types of texts that Sartre wrote, from his long philosophical works, to biographies, to journalism, to fiction, to plays, and also speeches and interviews. None of this is to diminish the textualist method, but to put it in context against the huge variety of reading strategies that have been and continue to be taken by readers of Sartre. Sartre Studies as a field has followed Sartre's eclecticism, drawing in scholars from fields beyond philosophy such as French studies, feminism, literature, theatre, history, Caribbean studies, queer theory, political science, Africana studies, post-colonial studies, Diaspora studies, Jewish studies, sound studies and more.

One of my frequent questions when reading this very readable books is about the style of philosophy Pinkard offers and its difference and similarity to the style of philosophy practiced by the community of Sartre scholars that I am familiar with. Pinkard notes that his book leaves 'the more scholarly tug and tussle with other scholars for the notes' (xvi). I wonder which scholars he is thinking of with these footnotes. I submit that he is not thinking of Sartre scholars, since for most of us, we are well aware of history of interpretation of Sartre on many key points that are raised in *Power, Practice, and Forms of Life*. A few examples of well-worn controversies in the interpretation of Sartre include: why Sartre offered a footnote to *Being and Nothingness* promising to write an ethics, but did not follow through; the status of *Existentialism as a Humanism*, as a speech that does or does not indicate the possible directions of a Sartrean ethics; the relationship of the unpublished *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

to his published work; Sartre's feminism, or lack thereof (see Lina Bell's work, among others); and the internal relationship between Sartre's philosophy and that of especially Beauvoir and Fanon, as well as Richard Wright and Négritude writers, including Léopold Senghor. I am sceptical about an interpretation of Sartre that would isolate him from these existentialist interlocutors who transformed his philosophy during his lifetime. To take the main example I am thinking of, if we isolate Sartre's dialectical thinking from his relationship with Frantz Fanon, then I think we get an impoverished notion of what the dialectic was for Sartre. In *What is Literature?* (London: Routledge, 1949) Sartre explains why he needed readers like Fanon to transform his writings: the dialectic of reader-and-writer was his main model of freedom constituted through cooperation prior to writing *Critique*. As George Cicciariello-Maher writes in *Decolonizing Dialectics*: (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), Fanon was a 'bridge between Europe and the colonies and thereby from a European to a more openly decolonial dialectics' (8).

Another audience that I think will get a lot out of this book would be Hegel scholars who have read a bit of Sartre, but want to get into his works. Pinkard's audience would seem to be philosophers have read a smattering of *Being and Nothingness*, and come very late, if at all, to *Critique*. Pinkard emphasizes that the *Critique* is an 'obscure' work, going so far as to say that Sartre is to blame for this obscurity, since the book was badly written.

Given his opening sentiment about the difficulty of the *Critique* and his interest in its reception and apparent fall into obscurity, I am curious as to why Pinkard does not study Sartre in relation to Africana existentialism or in relation to African thought, Caribbean thought, or the thought systems of the global south. The central contemporary figure in black existential philosophy, Lewis R. Gordon, who wrote his PhD thesis on Sartre, and published one of the most important books on Sartre in 1995, *Badfaith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Heights: Humanities Press), does not appear in the works cited list. The Africana Existentialist Mabogo P. More recently released an important book on Sartrean dialectics, *Sartre on Contingency: Antiracist Racism and Embodiment* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2021). Kathryn Sophia Belle is one of the central figures in understanding Sartre and his relationship to Fanon and Beauvoir, and his conception of an ethics of anti-oppression. (See—formerly Kathryn T. Gines—'Sartre and Fanon Fifty Years Later: To Retain or Reject the Concept of Race', *Sartre Studies International* 9:2: 55–67 (2003).) LaRose Parris's book *Being Apart: Theoretical and Existential Resistance in Africana Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015) is another very important contemporary take on Sartre's dialectical thought and its relationship to non-European thought systems.

In the conclusion to *Power, Practice, and Forms of Life* Pinkard argues that Sartre is a liberal. Such a counter-intuitive and shocking claim is certainly enough to get my hairs to stand on end—what a Sartrean thing to do! Pinkard writes, 'At the end,

Sartre even found himself committed to some vaguely liberal ideals even though he himself only expressed revulsion at any mention of “liberalism” (by which he seems to have meant laissez-faire liberal capitalism)’ (103).

What do we learn if we call Sartre a liberal and pull him towards the Rawlsian vocabulary of ‘justice’? I think we would be giving up on what has made Sartre so attractive to philosophers outside of Europe and the United States: his insistence that freedom be conceived in terms of oppression and an ethics of anti-oppression. ‘Resist oppression’, is the upshot of Sartrean politics, not an attempt to preserve what is rational in the real. For Pinkard, Sartre is, despite himself, a liberal, since he has a commitment to equality, views political conflict as inevitable, and is sceptical of institutions. Pinkard argues that the value of ‘equality’ is important to Sartre’s political thought (103). The conclusion of the book opens with a comparison between Sartre and John Rawls, as well as Isaiah Berlin. Rather than utilizing, say, David Detmer’s discussion of freedom in his classic *Freedom as Value: A Critique of the Ethical of Jean-Paul Sartre* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing, 1986), Pinkard offers his own version of the distinction between the concept of freedom in early Sartre and the concept of praxis in mid and late Sartre, the latter of which Pinkard calls effective freedom. Is Pinkard offering another version of the thesis in William Irwin’s *The Free Market Existentialist* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015)? The liabilities of turning Sartre into a capitalist have been stated well by Matt Eshelman in ‘Could Sartre have been a Free Market Capitalist’, *Sartre Studies International* 24:2: 84–100 (2018).

An interpretation of Sartre-as-reluctant-liberal faces challenges, the most basic one being Sartre’s anti-statist stance in the *Critique*. As I read the *Critique*, a core thesis is that the modern state alienates and serializes its population. Sartre rejects the basic premise of liberalism, which is that there can be a neutral state insuring the interests of all citizens through a form of universal inclusion. Pinkard does not buy the claim that Sartre was an anarchist. (See William L. Remley, *Jean-Paul Sartre’s Anarchist Philosophy*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.) I, on the other hand, believe that Sartre was always an anarchist. He has nothing nice to say about private property in any of his works, but especially in *Critique* he treats property as theft, a core claim of anarchism.

For Pinkard, though Sartre was not subtle about his rejection of democracy, writing among other things, a piece simply called ‘Elections A Trap for Fools’, there is a difference between Sartre’s exaggerated rhetoric and the philosophical position where he ends up. But Sartre is quite consistent across his life with his anti-statist, anti-liberal, pro-anarchist sentiments. For Sartre, the dialectic is open, never closed—it is at best a de-totalized totality. For Sartre there is no such thing as popular sovereignty as understood by Thomas Hobbes or John Locke or J.J. Rousseau—the modern state is an instrument of the oppressors. I note but disagree with Pinkard’s claim that Sartre rejected representative democracy but embraced direct

democracy. The Sartrean-Hegelian Michael Monahan, who wrote his PhD thesis on Sartre's *Critique* in 2003 has written frequently on Sartre's rejection of liberalism. (See Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008 and 'Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason and the Inevitability of Violence: Human Freedom in the Milieu of Scarcity', *Sartre Studies International* 14 (2008): 48–70.) One of the main points brought out by Monahan is that Sartre rejected the liberal notion of the consent (contract) as the basis for popular sovereignty.

One of Sartre's most damning rejections of liberalism comes in *Antisemite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1948), where he describes a character type, 'the liberal', or sometimes called 'the democrat'. The antisemitic liberal is *as* poisonous, indeed perhaps more poisonous, than the bigot. Sartre's antisemitic liberal is complicit in oppression by virtue of trusting that that 'rights of man' will prevail over structural racism. Pinkard contends that Sartre rejected the word liberalism, but that by virtue of his dialectical thinking, he could not completely escape liberal values. This is an interesting move, pushing Sartre towards Hegel's notion of the rational in the real. Sartre is, for Pinkard, a 'guardian of democracy' because 'freedom requires equality' (103). The argument that Pinkard is after could be framed in terms of an implication of the Sartrean notion of individual praxis in the *Critique*. Sartre argues that in some social groups, what he calls groups-in-fusion, there is a third party reciprocity, and I do see how one could move from the vocabulary of praxis to equality. But at what expense? Liberals like Rawls, Locke, Hobbes or Rousseau pin their theory on natural equality of all human beings. Sartre has no notion of natural equality and he rejects claims to human nature. I worry that a liberal interpretation of Sartre would defang the existential concept of praxis, conflating it with the notion of human nature found among classic liberals. Praxis is radically open, having no content, having no natural direction towards the good or the bad.

If we make Sartre a liberal, then what do we do with his scathing and valuable criticisms of racism and colonialism? Sartre went to lengths to show that colonialism and racism are systems. This would seem to me to be a direct contrast with the view offered by Pinkard, that Sartre was ultimately interested in not just cancelling, but also preserving modern political institutions and ways of life. Pinkard claims that Sartre transformed classic liberalism with Marxist views of power, and that Sartre is committed to 'multiculturalism' and the rejection of 'ethnic oppression' (98). Such terms as 'ethnic oppression' and 'multiculturalism' do not, to my knowledge appear anywhere in Sartre's work; he does not have comments on the notion of ethnicity, though he has extensive comments on the concept of race, and there is an extensive secondary literature on Sartre's anti-racism. I agree with Pinkard that Sartre is not focused on master rules for redistribution or justice. I would go farther and submit that the term 'justice' is an imposition of a liberal concept onto a Sartre. The existential term here is oppression, not injustice. I also think that any

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attempt to articulate Sartrean ethics would have to deal with Sartre's anti-moralism, as expressed most thoroughly in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, where he argues that ethics is always a failure.

In *What is Literature?* Sartre writes that all authors have an ideal, imaginary audience to whom they appeal. The writer issues the appeal as an act of spontaneity and generosity. The reader is free to reciprocate or not. The author and reader form a dialectic of freedom. From Pinkard's book, I have learned about a particular philosophical audience and their view of Sartre. This view is valuable to me, since, to me and the audience I have cultivated in my own work, the *Critique* is far from 'an unduly obscure work' (ix).

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